The Kind of Person the Superior General Ought to Be (1558)

This document, a chapter from the Part IX of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, articulates the desired qualities in the Jesuits’ superior general. Though the Constitutions were not approved until the first General Congregation of 1558, the first Jesuits elected Ignatius as their superior general in April 1541. Ignatius collaborated with Juan Alfonso de Polanco to draft the governing constitutions for much of the remaining sixteen years of his life. The Constitutions, as adopted, present six desired qualities of the Society’s superior general in order or importance, from “the general’s perfection in relation to God” to “external things.” Upon reading these traits, Pedro de Ribadeneira, the first official biographer of Ignatius, felt that “our blessed Father, without realizing, described himself as he was and left us a perfect likeness.” Luis Gonçalves da Câmara agreed, believing the description to be Ignatius’s self-portrait. For more on the history and content of this selection, please consult: Aldama, Antonio’s The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus: The Superior General, Notes for a Commentary.

[723] 1. In regard to the qualities which are desirable in the superior general [A], the first is that he should be closely united with God our Lord and have familiarity with him in prayer and in all his operations, so that from him, the fountain of all good, he may so much the better obtain for the whole body of the Society a large share of his gifts and graces, as well as great power and effectiveness for all the means to be employed for the help of souls.

[724] A. The six qualities treated in this chapter are the most important, the rest being reduced to them. For they comprise the general’s perfection in relation to God, together with what perfects his heart, understanding, and execution; and also the corporal and external gifts helpful to him. Moreover, the order of their listing indicates the importance at which they are rated.

[725] 2. The second quality is that he be a person whose example in all the virtues will be a help to the other members of the Society. Charity towards all his neighbors should particularly shine forth in him, and in a special way toward the members of the Society; likewise a genuine humility which will make him highly beloved of God our Lord and of human beings.

[726] 3. He ought also to be free from all inordinate affections, having them tamed and mortified so that interiorly they will not disturb the judgment of his intellect, and so that exteriorly he will be so composed and, in particular, so circumspect in speaking that none, either members of the Society (who should regard him as a mirror and model) or externs, will observe any thing or word in him that is not edifying.

[727] 4. However, he should know how to mingle the required rectitude and severity with kindness and gentleness in such a way that he neither lets himself be deflected from what he judges to be more pleasing to God our Lord nor fails to have proper sympathy for his sons. Thus even those who are
reprimanded or punished will recognize that he proceeds rightly in our Lord and with charity in what he does, even if it is against their liking according to the lower man.

[728] 5. Magnanimity and fortitude of soul are likewise highly necessary for him, so that he may bear the weaknesses of many, initiate great undertakings in the service of God our Lord, and persevere in them with the needed constancy, neither losing courage in the face of the contradictions, even from persons of high rank and power, nor allowing himself to be deflected by their entreaties or threats from what reason and the divine service require. He should be superior to all eventualities, not letting himself be exalted by success or cast down by adversity, and being quite ready to accept death, when necessary, for the good of the Society in the service of Jesus Christ our God and Lord.

[729] 6. The third quality is that he ought to be endowed with great intelligence and judgment, so that he is not lacking in this talent in either speculative or practical matters which may arise. And although learning is highly necessary for one who will have so many learned men in his charge, still more necessary is prudence along with experience in spiritual and interior matters, so that he may be able to discern the various spirits and to give counsel and remedies to so many who will have spiritual necessities. He also needs discretion in exterior matters and a manner of handling such diverse affairs as well as of conversing with such various persons from within and without the Society.

[730] 7. The fourth quality, one highly necessary for the execution of business, is that he should be vigilant and solicitous in undertaking enterprises and vigorous in carrying them through to their completion and perfection, rather than careless and remiss about leaving them begun but unfinished.

[731] 8. The fifth quality concerns the body. As regards health, appearance, and age, account should be taken on the one hand of dignity and authority, and on the other of the physical strength demanded by his charge [B], so as to be able therewith to fulfill his office to the glory of God our Lord.

[732] 8. Thus it seems that he ought to be neither of very advanced age, which is generally unsuited for the labors and cares of such a charge, nor of great youth, which generally is not accompanied by the proper authority and experience.

[733] 9. The sixth quality regards external things [C]. Among these preference should be given to those which help more toward edification and the service of God our Lord in such a charge. Such are normally esteem, a good reputation, and whatever else contributes toward authority among those within and without.

[734] C. Nobility, wealth which was possessed in the world, honor, and the like are external endowments. Other things being equal, these are worthy of some consideration; but even if they are lacking, there are other things more important which could suffice for election.

[735] 10. Finally, he ought to be one of those who are most outstanding in every virtue, most deserving in the Society, and known as such for the longest time. If any of the aforementioned qualities
should be wanting, he should at least not Jack great probity and love for the Society, nor good judgment accompanied by sound learning. In other matters, the aids which he will have (and which will be treated below (789–808]) will be able through God’s help and favor to supply for much.

Editors’ note:
The selection above comes from the English translation of the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, completed in 1996. As John Padberg, S.J., noted at the time, “for ease of reference, the text of the Constitutions includes the customary sequential paragraph numbers included within brackets ([ ]).” For further ease of reference here, the superscript verse numbers, as found in the source below, do not appear here. The italicized sections are clarifications original to the text as inserted by Ignatius and Polanco.